

**J. Eugene Clay. Editor. *Beasts, Humans, and Transhumans in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 45. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. xxiv + 168 pp. ISBN: 9782503590639. Cloth: €70**

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This volume consists of an introduction and three parts. Part I (3 chapters) is entitled ‘Metamorphosis’, part II (2 chapters) ‘Beasts and Humans’, and part III (4 chapters) ‘Beyond Humanity’. Since it is in the introduction where the main topics and issues are presented, we will make a more thorough analysis of this part before we analyse the rest of the contents of the volume.

In the introduction, Eugene Clay states that human beings have descended from other animals (p. viii) by means of natural selection as described by Charles Darwin in his famous works *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In doing so, he underlines the idea that evolution is a natural process that still continues and, as such, that the human species has the possibility to evolve into something else in the future. The questions *how* and *what is possible* in terms of evolution are replied by pointing out the term *transhumanism*, coined by Julian Huxley (1887-1975). This idea of *transhumanism* becomes more meaningful after the introduction of genetic modifications and artificial intelligence, the two possible tools for accelerating Darwinian evolution. Among the examples, the author mentions the “creation of an autotrophic human” and “uploading [the] human mind into powerful supercomputers” (p. ix). The discussion on transhumanism ends with an inspiring sentence which I find insightful: “That the human condition is a transitional stage between brute and angel, temporal and eternal, matter and spirit, the limited and infinite” (p. ix). This sentence depicts both vitality and humanity as representing the processes between “the source” and “the sink”, or in other words, describing where we come from and where we are going to in terms of evolution.

Clay then briefly investigates the relations between humans and animals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century before he proceeds to the sections entitled ‘Biblical Heritage’ and ‘Classical Heritage’. His claim within this section is that the Darwinist vision of humanity has supported the animal -rights movement and the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, historical studies in the last two decades have demonstrated that the questions on Post-H, Trans-H and animals are not novel. In the subsequent few pages, the author sketches an account of the biblical heritage regarding the different visions of humanity, the mortal and the transcendent. The biblical role of humanity is understood as something between animals and angels since humans are made in God’s image and are given dominion over the Earth. According to some authors, the anthropocentric verses may be identified as the historical roots of the ecological crisis. Together with this view of humanity, the

onocentaur, the pilosus, the lamia, Leviathan, the seven headed dragon and alike are mentioned as the biblical monsters and demons which demonstrate God's power.

The next few pages are devoted to an analysis of the classical heritage and show its influence on early medieval authors such as John Scotus Eriugena and Pseudo-Dionysius. Within this section Clay talks about some classical traditions and beliefs and the rationality of animals. The author explains that, on the one hand, Aristotle's reasoning that "nature has made all the animals for the sake of man" probably was reflected in the views of most European Christians (p. xv); on the other, Galen (130-200) agreed with the idea of humanity (men) as standing between gods and animals by means of intellectuality (divine) and mortality (bestial), which was adopted by Christian theologians. The aforementioned ideas (of Aristotle and of Galen) probably influenced John Scotus Eriugena (810-877) as he repeated a similar idea in his *Periphyseon*: "Hunc mundum usibilem cum omnibus suis partibus, a summo usque deorsum, propter hominum esse factum" (*This visible world, with all its parts from top to bottom, was made for the sake of man*) (p. xvii). After Pseudo-Dionysius' synthesis of Neoplatonism with Christian faith, there was a "grand scheme" based on the understanding that the ultimate goal of humanity was a deification which implied the deification of the beasts as well. Clay claims that this Christian debate on animals (including animal souls) can be traced back to art, folktales, and hagiographies.

However, in my opinion, we should distinguish whether this view of animals is produced by religion or by culture. In order to ensure this, we can compare and find similar issues in different cultures in the same religion (intra-religion studies) and in different religions (inter-religious studies). Among Christian hagiographies the *Physiologus* (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century) became a standard source for medieval bestiaries and was based on allegorical meanings. It was translated into several languages from Syriac, and it flourished as a genre between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Latin. The *Physiologus*, the *Hexaemeron* of Ambrose of Milan and Polinus's *Wonders of the World* should as well be taken into consideration as valuable sources for cultural studies. Also, Islamic sources, such as the *Hayat al-Hayawan* (*Life of the Animals*) of al-Damiri (d. 1405) as well as *Aja'ib al-Makhluqat wa Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat* (*The Wonders of Creatures and the Marvels of Creation*) of al-Qazwini may be regarded as a counterpart for such cultural studies. Based on either Arabic or Greek texts, the European rediscovery of Aristotle radically transformed medieval science and philosophy. In this regard, the Latin edition of Aristotle's biological writings by Michael Scott (1175-1232) paved the "naturalistic" way for *De Animalibus* of Albertus Magnus (1200-1280), who focused directly on nature instead of the allegorical meaning of natural phenomena and consequently made the difference between zoography and zoology in European studies. This said, let us move onto examining the rest of the contents of the book.

In the first chapter, Robert Sturges puts forth the view that the stories about Merlin as a character between the beast, the human, and the supernatural served as a source for an idea of human nature. Sturges points out that the representations of Merlin dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries depict him as something between human and non-human as well as between different forms of non-human. In a Welsh text, Myriddin / Merlin shows a dual

nature ranging between the animal / wild man and the prophet: *Homo sylvaticus*. As stated in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Merlin is the son of a nun and a non-human father. His mother explains that his father is thought to be a shapeshifter, an incubus or an angelic spirit who acts devilishly by impregnating the nun. This might explain the situation in which Merlin was depicted as “a devotee of the forest itself rather than the human civilisation” (p. 8). Among the many discussions on the demonic nature of Merlin, St. Thomas Aquinas stands alone to claim that an incubus is not capable of siring children on his own but must steal the sperm of a human male in order to do so (p. 10). Apparently, in the Middle Ages there are many types of legends around Merlin’s dual (or blurred) nature. His abnormal hairiness as an animal, his prophecy on the knowledge of the present and the past, his metamorphosis (into a stag or boar, for example) “test the limits not only of the human, but of the boundary between the divine and the diabolical as well” (p. 14). According to the legend, Merlin may be captured with cooked food since cooking food is a distinction between humans and animals. Merlin stands at the intersection between the human and the diabolical, between the human and the animal, between nature and culture (p. 17). Although, 13<sup>th</sup> century thought comes to insist, Sturges argues, on the greater separation of the human from the animal and the demonic.

Anna Lukacs examines Thomas Bradwardine (1300-1349) in the second chapter and his account of human transformation into animals. According to Bradwardine, beasts are something into which humans metamorphose, that is why they (the beasts) are not discussed as beings within their own identity. Moreover, beasts and humans are analysed in terms of their relation to each other. Bradwardine rejected the ancient doctrine of metempsychosis and emphasized the power of human beings to change sex or become animals through magic, alchemy, and witchcraft. In other words, in his analyses of metamorphosis he draws an anthropocentric worldview. Lukacs points out Bradwardine’s account of metamorphosis and metempsychosis because, for him, humans are understood as powerful actors of salvation. According to Bradwardine, metamorphosis cannot be repeated but can be reversed, and metempsychosis is the periodical or continuous peregrination of the soul into different living beings. Since metempsychosis cannot be reversed, he refused it.

Bradwardine’s argument and reasoning on natural and historical sources about the conception of the Virgin Mary is well summarized in the proceeding pages. Lukacs claims that Bradwardine demythologizes the metamorphoses since mythical personalities are historical individuals, that is, they are ordinary humans. Lukacs groups the types of metamorphosis mentioned by Bradwardine into four categories and also examines the hierarchy of natural and supernatural powers regarded as the causes of bestial transformations. We understand that Bradwardine used a spectrum of poetry, history, philosophy, and theology sources from antiquity to his own period. According to Bradwardine, alchemy is the human power of nature in animate and inanimate things. To suspend natural activity magic songs and medicinal plants were used. It is also noteworthy that metamorphosed humans were only animal-shaped, which means that their minds remained human. In any case, metamorphosis had temporal restrictions formulated as “ars

*transformationum et reformationum*” (p. 31). Lukacs concludes that for Bradwardine, metamorphoses were possible and frequent, however, metempsychosis was prohibited in favour of the Resurrection as he emphasised “*si etiam homo non moritur, non resurget*” (“if people do not die, they do not resurrect either”) (p. 36).

John Nassichuk in chapter 3 explores Nicholas Brizard’s (1520-1565) *Metamorphosis Amoris*. Brizard used a “discourse of wonder” (p. xxii), in which beasts admire learning, love, and language. Brizard’s *Metamorphosis* can be inserted in a tradition of descriptive poetry, and it was written with a pedagogical purpose for students of philology who were familiar with Latin and Greek. Brizard’s opera finds its precedents in medieval encyclopaedic authors such as Isidore of Seville and Rabanus Maurus. Moreover, Brizard’s didactical imitation of Ovid’s own *Metamorphoses* was so attractive that it was plagiarised in French literature. Nassichuk finds Brizard’s work “constituting an invention of considerable originality” (p. 41). Several pages are devoted to emphasising Brizard’s originality and inventiveness as well as in framing his method on the random use of 66 guises adopted by Cupid (p. 42). This random – neither taxonomic nor fictional – appearances of animate (e.g., tiger, bear, wolf, serpent etc.) and inanimate (e.g., sword, rock, river etc.) objects has a finality of change. The ultimate metamorphic guise is *nihil* or “nothing”. The final scene of this metamorphic sequence perhaps implies the deeper message that after too much change, we turn into nothing in the end. Brizard imitates Ovid’s model without extensive borrowing, bearing some resemblances independently of Ovid as seen in his use of Latin language (p. 51). He provided his students with an inventive and effective use of examples from ancient passages, which was probably the reason behind his interest in poems of natural or supernatural animal imagery.

The second part of the book starts with chapter 4 in which Susan Anderson examines 135 miniatures from a 13<sup>th</sup> century bestiary manuscript and discovers a “narrative of dominance” (p. xxii). Anderson, in her careful mining, discusses the figure of the boar transgressing the boundaries of the human and the beast, allegorically representing “the other”. Today, it is not easy to agree with Anderson in her deduction that “killing an animal is the ultimate expression of human identity”. This idea probably emerges from animal studies groups which note that “[killing] manifests human power over animals” (p. 62-63). We can compare two cases here: when I am killed by a scorpion – though I am more powerful than the scorpion – this is called an *accident*; however, when a scorpion is killed by a human being this is *the extreme manifestation of power*. Interestingly, we learn that in the Middle Ages that the similarity of human anatomy to that of the pig caused a transformative vision, as the anagrammatic corpus / porcus phrases reveal that “the pig has much in common with humans in its body...” (p. 65). Anderson investigates the colourful miniatures in the bestiary, with which she makes use of the illustrative apparatus in order to diffuse into the context of the text. She mentions that hunting was a task of masculine and aristocratic identity, indeed it still is the case in developed countries. The modern reader would understand that it has been important for Anderson to place hunting in the middle of the constructed gender. In the next pages, she frames an example reading of English / Welsh debate through the illustrations in MS Bodley 764. According to Anderson “the theme

of driving the Jews from their home has a strong parallel to aristocratic boar hunting practices” (p. 76). Indeed, it is easy to understand Anderson on the pig-image description and her commentary which emphasises “the anti-human, the anti-Christian, the anti-male, the anti-self”, and briefly any kind of “othered”.

Kathryn Renton in chapter 5 shows that horsemanship was a part of the concept of nobility in Renaissance Spain. By comparing two riding styles *a la jineta* and *a la brida*, Renton questions the nature of horsemanship and the nobility of horse and rider. Superiority of men over animals and noblemen to others can be viewed in horsemanship in early modern Europe (p. 80). We read that the trajectory of horsemanship moves from Italy (16<sup>th</sup> century) to France (17<sup>th</sup> century) while Renton examines a Spanish style of riding called *la jineta* based on two Spanish authors one from Seville (16<sup>th</sup> century) and the other from Cordoba (17<sup>th</sup> century). The author establishes a good connection and an order among the court, the nobility, and the horsemanship. We learn that in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain there was a transition in the court from an itinerant to a sedentary model, which resulted in the introduction of ceremonial protocols and also hierarchies among the nobility. Renton lays the milestones in the history of horsemanship in the Iberian Peninsula by mentioning the earliest European work authored by the King of Portugal in 1438, then the opening of the *Academy of Horsemanship* in Naples in 1530s, as well as some famous European work authored by Federico Grisone in 1550. Later she discusses how the traditional (Muslim and North African originated) *la jineta* style competed with the newly introduced (Christian and Neapolitan originated) *la brida* style. Renton sketches an excellent interpretation of the court, the nobility, the horse as a triangle, and the rider in the middle of these three, especially in the case of Spanish nobility, Habsburg Empire and *Libros de la jineta* in the Renaissance. I find this chapter very valuable since the relation between the animal (horse) and the human (rider) has been well discussed with its social consequences.

In chapter 6, which is the first chapter of the third part of this volume, David Scott Macnab shows archdeacon Walter Map’s censorship of the unrighteous King William II Rufus, who was condemned with an allusion to “the noonday demon” of Psalms 90. William II Rufus, King of England, died probably because of an arrow which was released either accidentally or on purpose, while he was hunting in the New Forest. However, the author aims to analyse the words of a particular medieval commentator who declares that there was a sinister agency behind Rufus’s death (p. 107). It could be an assassination since there were political figures ready to get the crown. After reading the citations from medieval authors like Eadmer, John of Worcester, Orderic Vitalis, and Fulchred of Salisbury, we see that the king’s death is an occasion of *just judgement of God*, *vengeance of God*, or *wrath of God with the vengeance of heaven*, since his father destroyed churches, expelled the peasants and the land became the New Forest, habitable by wild beasts. The reader will not find it easy to make a connection between a story of medieval condemnation after a king’s suspicious death to the subject of beasts, humans and transhumans since there is not a single depiction and illustration of either the demon or any demonic beast in this case.

Amanda Downey in chapter 7 analyses portrayals of Satan in medieval (12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) illuminations from England and France. The medieval artists combined some characteristics of animals and monsters to depict Satan in an imaginative manner. In order to recognise the devil, they used an amalgamation of forms and characteristics of beast, humans and transhumans. It is noteworthy to learn that “medieval Christians did not view the devil’s temptations as past events, but as a contemporary challenge that affected everyone” (p. 123). Medieval artists used Pliny’s *Natural History* (c. 77) and the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East* (c. 1000) for the descriptions of named or unnamed races, which were “proud, immoral text and unclean” (p. 125). Medieval bestiaries were also rich sources for artists, so that they associated the images of some animals like serpents, dragons, owls, foxes, donkeys, and monkeys with the imaginary of the devil. Besides his bestial form, the devil had exaggerated white eyes, a bulbous nose, small lips, large ears, a wide mouth, and dark skin, since he used every opportunity and method to “tempt humanity into sin and regain control of the world” (p. 135). This chapter – unlike the previous one – gives the reader a satisfactory description of the visual imagery created by medieval artists, which they used to illuminate representations of the devil. Downey also points out that medieval artists attributed the devil features corresponding to foreigners and minorities whom they feared. This is an important point which shows that fear of “the other” still has potential extensions in this century. I find this chapter persuasive and valuable because it highlights that in order to make illuminations of the devil, first of all we define our conceptions of “us” and “the other”, then we should avoid demonising “the other”.

In chapter 8, Rachel Chantos argues that grotesque ornamentation of Italian wedding chests (*cassoni*) reflected anxieties about marriage and pregnancy, since these strange motifs symbolised the change of the bride’s body (and even her mind). Chantos presents a study of *cassoni* of the late Renaissance. In doing so, her discussion includes 3D figures that are different from 2D illuminations examined in the previous chapters. We also learn that the art of *cassoni* represents the unique development of aesthetic thought in early modern Italy. Built through the techniques of “intarsia” and “pastiglia”, many *cassoni* were decorated with plant motifs (e.g., acanthus and lily) as well. Chantos considers the ornamental motifs as a “microcosm” to understand social and cultural values in early modern Italy (p. 141). In addition to the investigation related to beasts, humans and transhumans, what we find as a message from this chapter is that novel approaches like the grotesque ornamentation extend to the future. Chantos’s scholarship is dedicated to the messages or meanings carved as motifs of *cassoni* either in the form of acanthus, or dolphins or as hybrid mythical creatures. Chantos also attributes a social role to the chest that is “understanding as objects for the change in the new bride’s life” (p. 145). Overall, this chapter is full of interesting and insightful points on Italian *cassoni* and the grotesque art which, according to Chantos, have largely been overlooked in art historical scholarship.

Thomas Willard in chapter 9 analyses *De Nymphis* (1566) of Paracelsus (1493-1541) which offers descriptions of so-called “monsters” as sources of knowledge rather than fear. Willard points out that Paracelsus – being a contemporary of Martin Luther – lived during a social transformation in the German-speaking world. Willard also draws an outline of Paracelsus’s

character, since he was raised in mining villages and thus minerals came to exert a great influence upon his philosophy. Besides this, because Paracelsus was subject to a deficient diet during childhood, his physical appearance was unusual and, probably, he was treated as a freak. Paracelsus preached sexual abstinence and Willard argues that there is a chance that he even practiced it (p. 152). Moreover, he had an interest in creating homunculus or artificial life by means of alchemical methods. In this interesting chapter, which is likely the most representative piece of this volume when it comes to transhuman studies, we read that Paracelsus wants to understand the position of monstrous creatures in God's creation. Maybe he was thinking like a taxonomist who was rapt in the diversity of the manifestation of life and also interested in creating artificial life. Willard's abstraction guides us to say that Paracelsus probably had the idea that (bio)diversity reflected God's omnipotence and men should explore all of these creatures. Regarding the diversity, it is noteworthy that the marvels of Paracelsus lack souls. Instead, they are elemental or natural spirits (p. 156). Willard devotes more than four pages to the different types of *homunculi*. It is quite interesting to read Paracelsus giving an account of creating *homunculi* which may be regarded as the pre- modern origin of transhumanism.

In summary, this volume addresses responses to the questions of how medieval and early modern thinkers defined and understood human nature and also the relationship and the difference between human animals and non-human animals. Besides the specific contribution this volume brings into the academic milieu, its general contribution, in my view, is that while standing in the present, it emphasises the necessity to analyse the past in order to attain a perspective of the future. Utilising historical, literary and artistic sources, this volume represents a multidisciplinary composition which examines the knowledge of non-human animals. In doing so, it inspires the reader to question and (re)consider human nature, its locus in the biosphere, and its place in the cosmos. This book, thus, would benefit researchers interested in the subjects of historical studies, philosophy, art and critical studies, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.